

Panama Canal

Q. Mr. President, why aren't you going to Panama? I mean, it's a major event in history.

The President. Well, first of all, I have taken, and may have to take—I've already taken, I think, a dozen foreign trips this year. It is a major event. I think my interest in Latin America is well-known, but I may have to take yet another trip before the end of the year, and about that time, which is why I asked President Carter and Secretary Albright to head our delegation.

I think that President Carter deserves enormous credit for his leadership in getting the Panama Canal Treaty through. It was, at the time, as you remember, very controversial, immensely unpopular. A lot of Members in the Senate were—had their seats put in peril over it. And I think it—

Q. So you're not against the turnover?

The President. Oh, no. I supported it at the time, and I still support it. I think it's the right thing to do. I think that the new Government of Panama is committed to maintaining the canal in an appropriate way and keeping it open and working with us to do so, and having good relations.

So no one in Panama or anywhere in Latin America should draw any adverse conclusion. We have a lot of things going on in the world now. I've been out of the country a lot. I need to get ready for the new Congress and the new budget, and I may have to take another foreign trip at about the same time, which is why I have not committed to make the trip. But I think—

Q. What, which one?

The President. I can't talk about it. [Laughter] But I think—I do think that Jimmy Carter deserves to lead our delegation down there. He did a historic and great thing in advocating the Panama Canal Treaty. But the people of Panama should know that this President and our Government strongly support both the treaty and the event, which will occur in a few days.

Q. You're not worried about the Chinese controlling the canal?

The President. I think the Chinese will, in fact, be bending over backwards to make sure that they run it in a competent and able and fair manner. This is like them, is like China coming into the WTO. I think they'll

want to demonstrate to a distant part of the world that they can be a responsible partner, and I would be very surprised if any adverse consequences flowed from the Chinese running the canal.

President's Possible Visit to Ireland

Q. When are you going to Ireland?

The President. I don't know. You know, I'd like to go once a month.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:20 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to President Boris Yeltsin of Russia.

Remarks at a Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee Luncheon in San Francisco

November 30, 1999

Thank you very much. Thank you, Bill; thank you, Sally; thank you, Leader Gephardt; and thank you, Nancy Pelosi, for always being so wonderful to take all of your various charges from the D-triple-C to the DNC to your President into San Francisco and find your friends and help us.

It's good to be back here. I was here, as Bill said, a couple years ago. And we had a beautiful dinner here, and I love this place. But it's even more beautiful in the daylight. And I want to thank all the Members for coming. Chairman Torres, thank you for being here. And I want to thank the mayor for coming.

I am so indebted to California, and particularly to San Francisco, for being so good to me and Hillary and the Vice President and Mrs. Gore. And I've also learned so much. Every time I come to northern California I learn something new, so I'm less technologically challenged. [Laughter]

And I've learned a lot from Willie Brown. I've learned how to dress better. [Laughter] I never thought I would live long enough to see him in a race where somebody was running to the left of him; this is a great, great day. [Laughter] I don't know how there is any oxygen left over there. [Laughter] I'm still learning from you, and I thank you, Mr. Mayor.

Let me say also, this is the first opportunity I've had in public to thank Dick Gephardt

and all the others who are here in our caucus, and Senator Boxer, for their stalwart strength in fighting for our budget priorities. I just signed yesterday the first budget of the 21st century. And I think it's worth mentioning that because, and only because, they stayed with me, we got our continuing commitment to 100,000 teachers; we doubled, more than doubled, the funds allocated to after-school and summer school programs for children, something that Senator Boxer has fought for a long time; we've, for the first time ever, got funds to States that will agree to target failing schools and give them money to either shut them down or turn them around.

This was a remarkable thing. We got 50,000 more police for our neighborhoods with the highest crime rates. We passed the remarkable bill called the Kennedy-Jeffords bill, which will enable disabled people to go into the workplace and keep their Medicaid health insurance so that they can work and become taxpaying citizens. They would be totally uninsurable otherwise. We even got some money to pay for people who are not disabled yet but who are uninsurable—people with HIV, people with Parkinson's who can't be legally declared disabled—because they stuck with me. And we got for the first time a big chunk of money for the so-called lands legacy initiative that the Vice President fought so hard for, to set-aside funds. And a lot of other things.

We also left a lot of things undone. We didn't pass the Patients' Bill of Rights yet; we didn't pass the minimum wage increase yet; we didn't pass the hate crimes legislation yet or the "Employment and Non-Discrimination Act" yet; and we haven't yet taken the strong action I would like to see to extend Social Security beyond the life of the baby boom generation and to reform and modernize Medicare and add a prescription drug benefit.

We beat a huge and irresponsible tax cut, which enables us to continue to pay down the deficit, and we are now on the track to make America debt-free for the first time since 1835, which means that all these entrepreneurs in northern California will be able to get money at lower interest rates for another generation and to get us a whole generation of prosperity.

But what I want you to understand is it happened only because they were willing to stick with me. Otherwise, there would have been no 100,000 teachers, no 50,000 police, no disability employment bill. It would not have happened. We wouldn't have gotten the lands legacy money. All the environmental riders would have been attached to the legislation that we beat back. All of that would have happened. They stayed.

Now I want to put that in the larger perspective of where we've been, very briefly, for the last 7 years and where we're going, because, you know, people sometimes look at me and say, "What are you doing here? You're not running for anything." And I am, too—I'm running for what Mr. Gephardt said; I want to be a good citizen. And I'm here because I believe in Dick Gephardt's leadership, Nancy Pelosi's leadership, and the potential of our party.

One of you when you went through the line said to me, "Do you have any regrets?" And I said, "Just a few;" and I'm here trying to rectify one of them. I regret that we lost the congressional majority in 1994. And it happened because, frankly, because I pushed the country and the Congress to deal with some major challenges simultaneously: to deal with this awful budget deficit, without giving up on our commitment to invest more in the health care, in the education, in the environment of our country; to take on the issue of guns, which no administration, no Congress had taken on since Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King were assassinated; and to deal with the health care crisis.

One of Dick's colleagues said to me the other day—he slapped me on the back and said, "You know, they told me if I voted for your health care program, health care would become more bureaucratic and fewer people would be insured at work. And I voted for it and, sure enough, that's what happened"—[laughter]—"health care has become more bureaucratic and fewer people are insured at work, because it didn't pass." [Laughter]

So I say to you, look at the record that these people have helped us to establish. In 1992—just remember what California was

like and the country was like: economic distress, social division, political drift, Government discredited. Don't let anybody forget that as we come into this session. Just ask them to remember what it was like in '91 and '92: economic distress, social division, political drift, Government discredited.

And you gave Al Gore and I a chance to work with them. And we said we want a country where there is opportunity for all, responsibility from all, and a community of all Americans, where everybody can be a part. And we had all these ideas. But you just bought an argument. Well, 7 years later, there is not an argument. There is evidence. And I think that it's worth repeating, because—I know I'm preaching to the choir here, but you need to go out and share this—in February we'll have the longest, not peacetime, the longest expansion of any kind in our history; we have 19.8 million new jobs, the lowest unemployment rate in 30 years, the lowest welfare rolls in 30 years, the lowest poverty rates in 20 years, the highest homeownership in history.

In addition to that, the society is healing. We have the lowest crime rates in 25 years, the lowest teen pregnancy rates in 30 years. We have the lowest female unemployment rates in 40 years and the lowest poverty rate among single-parent households in 40 years. And we've set aside more land than any administration except those of Franklin and Theodore Roosevelt, including 40 million roadless acres in the national forests. The land is safer; the water is cleaner; the air is cleaner. We've cleaned up three times as many toxic waste dumps as the previous two administrations. We have 90 percent of our kids immunized for the first time in history; 20 million people have taken advantage of the family and medical leave law, which was vetoed by the previous administration. Four hundred thousand people who shouldn't get guns have not been able to buy handguns because of the Brady bill, which was vetoed by the previous administration.

So I say to you this is not an argument anymore. There is evidence, and I want you to remember those numbers. And when you talk to the skeptics and you talk to the doubters, you need to go out and tell people what the evidence is. And if you look ahead, the

real issue is—and Dick talked about this—you know I want them to be in the majority because of the issue of education, because there is still a lot more to be done. I want them to be in the majority because I do believe they will help to conduct their business in a way that will promote the one America that I believe is so important.

I am very proud of the fact that the United States has played a major role in trying to reconcile warring and hating factions from Northern Ireland to the Middle East to the Balkans to Africa. But I want us to do that at home, too, which is why I want this hate crimes legislation to pass. You only have to look at what happened at the Jewish school in Los Angeles or to the Filipino postman who was murdered there or what happened in the rampage in the Middle West, where everybody from the former African-American basketball coach at Northwestern to a Korean Christian walking out of his church—these people were killed—James Byrd dragged to death, Matthew Shepard stretched out on a rack. There is still a lot of that in us.

And what I would like to just ask you to think about and what I think about all the time is, okay, we've had all these good things happen to us, and our country now, thanks to a lot of you and technology—I should have mentioned when I became—when we started NetDay here in 1994, 15 percent of our schools were connected to the Internet; 89 percent are now, thanks to a lot of you and the E-rate. I could just go on and on. You need to remember these things and talk to people about them.

But the big question is, what are we going to do now? What will we do with a moment of prosperity that is, in my lifetime unprecedented. Never in my life have we had this much economic strength, this much social progress, this kind of opportunity free of external threat or internal crisis to shape the future for our children. What are we going to do about it?

And there will be all kinds of siren songs in the election season to kind of distract people from that or to get us to lower our sights or be more selfish or be more shortsighted. And the truth is, I bet you every one of you can cite some point in your personal life, your

family life, or your business life when you got in trouble because things were going well and you broke your concentration. You relaxed; you got diverted; you got divided; you got indulgent.

Well, the country is no different. We have to realize this is a truly precious moment. In my lifetime, it has never happened. And the reason I want Dick Gephardt to be the Speaker is I think that we ought to—yes, we made a lot of advances in education, but we don't have a world-class education for all our children, and we shouldn't stop until we do. Yes, we continue to pay down the debt at record rates, and we've got the first back-to-back balanced budgets in 42 years. But we haven't extended Social Security beyond the life of the baby boom generation; we haven't extended Medicare and added that prescription drug benefit when 75 percent of the seniors in this country can't afford the medicine they're supposed to take. So we haven't dealt with the challenge of the aging of America as much as we should.

We haven't done everything we should do to make this the safest big country in the world. We ought to close the gun show loophole in the Brady bill. We ought to pass the child trigger lock legislation. It's not just crimes that are the problem. We have the biggest accidental death rate by guns in the world. And to give you an idea of how bad it is, the American death rate, accidental death rate from guns, is 9 times the rate of the next 25 biggest industrial economies combined. So I think it's worth a little extra to have those child trigger locks.

We've still got serious challenges in health care. We ought to pass the Patients' Bill of Rights. We ought to let people over 55 who don't have health insurance anymore buy into Medicare. We ought to continue our work to help children, enroll children in our health insurance program and cover other people who don't have it.

We've got a chance to do something serious about poverty for the first time in a generation. One of the things that I'm most encouraged about on our side in the Presidential debate is there is an almost complete consensus that part of our bounty ought to be used to drastically cut child poverty in this country. And that's good. We also have an

opportunity that we have not had in my lifetime to bring free enterprise and investment into the most distressed areas of the country. And I have been going around the country trying to highlight these things.

I consider this a big opportunity. And as all of you who live on the Internet know, technology gives us a chance to bring economic opportunity to people and places that were hitherto too isolated to take advantage of it.

Now these are just some of the big challenges that are out there. And I promise you, I fought through this last budget. I've been through this thing now from can't til can't for 6 years. I'm here because I do not believe my country will realize its full potential unless they are in the majority and unless he is the Speaker. And I think if he is, they will.

So I ask you, tell people what was in the budget and why. Tell people what's happened in the last 7 years and why. And most important, tell people what we can do in the future if we have the right people representing you, and help them win. It is profoundly important.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:45 p.m. at a private residence. In his remarks, he referred to dinner hosts Bill and Sally Hembrecht; Art Torres, chair, State Democratic Party; and Mayor Willie L. Brown, Jr., of San Francisco.

Statement on the Anniversary of the Brady Handgun and Violence Prevention Act

November 30, 1999

Today, on the sixth anniversary of the historic Brady law, I am pleased to announce new figures that demonstrate the profound impact this legislation has had on public safety. Data released today by the Department of Justice show that the Brady law, since its passage in 1993, has helped block over 470,000 sales by licensed gun dealers to felons, fugitives, stalkers, and others prohibited from purchasing firearms. In the last year alone, the National Instant Criminal Background Check System created under the Brady law has blocked sales to over 160,000 of these restricted buyers. These numbers,